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AUTHOR Hanusey, Richard D.; Jameson, Irene S.
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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, local community organizations have emerged in urban centers as new participants in educational power politics, as community leaders have come to believe that education is the key to solving urban social problems and improving local communities and neighborhoods. Many school administrators, however, are reluctant to share their power and authority in the educational decision making process with neighborhood associations. One of the reasons for administrators' reluctance to share decision making is their fear of visibility and vulnerability in the community. There is no indication, however, on the part of neighborhood associations, that they wish to actually dominate educational decision making or obtain community control. Rather, they wish to work with administrators. Some administrators are currently in favor of sharing decisions. Nevertheless, in most interactions with community groups, administrators continue to assume the leader dominant role out of fear that their power will be usurped, or out of unawareness for the potential benefits of participatory educational management. Urban school administrators must realize that the longer neighborhood associations are denied participation in decision making which affects the quality of life in their communities, the more likely they are to emerge as militant pressure groups. (Author/GC)

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THE NAME OF THE GAME IS POWER--AND NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS
DON'T BELONG ON THE SIDELINES

Richard D. Hanusey and Irene S. Jameson

While school and community planners have been searching for viable mechanisms for community participation in the educational decision-making process, neighborhood associations have been sitting on the sidelines waiting to get into the game of educational power politics. Not that neighborhood associations are "somebody new in the neighborhood."

Neighborhood associations, which are formally structured, locally based voluntary organizations of neighbors who join together for the purpose of solving problems of local concern through cooperative action, have been around for more than half a century. The problem is that school administrators have largely overlooked or deliberately ignored the potential of neighborhood associations as partners in educational decision-making.

On the whole, school administrators, especially in the urban areas, have viewed neighborhood associations as local community action groups primarily concerned about zoning, street cleaning, health and welfare, housing, crime, and adult education. If neighborhood associations became involved in the public schools at all, it was usually perceived to be on a "crisis basis."

In an address prepared for the April 1970 meeting of the American Society for Public Administration, Lyke said about the relationship between neighborhood associations and school administrators:

Lacking firm financial and organizational bases, the associations can muster large meetings to protest school conditions only when a political crisis occurs or is created. Occasionally they threaten school officials by provoking an embarrassing boycott or upsetting a school referendum; generally they can only criticize from the sidelines.

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School administrators have discovered that they can simply ignore neighborhood associations as long as a major crisis does not break out.¹

In the last decade, however, local community organizations have emerged in urban centers as the new participants in the game of educational power politics as more and more community groups have come to believe that education is the key to solving social problems of the city and to improving local communities and neighborhoods. Some examples cited in the literature frequently are the Woodlawn Organization in Chicago,² Germantown Community Council in Philadelphia,³ Adams-Morgan Community Council in Washington, D. C.,⁴ Ludlow Community Association in Shaker Heights, Ohio,⁵ and the Community Council of Greater New Haven.⁶ In each of these cities, educational programs were planned with and by local community groups. More importantly, real decision-making power--albeit in limited areas--was delegated to the organizations by the boards of education.

Despite this apparent presence of a new group of players in the game of educational power politics, studies conducted by the authors of the influences of neighborhood associations upon the schools of an urban school district indicate that neighborhood associations are still being kept on the sidelines.⁷ Findings show that many school administrators are very reluctant to involve neighborhood groups beyond token participation and that school administrators espouse the theory of participatory management but actually practice leader-dominant management.

An analysis of these administrative postures surfaces two questions:

- (1) Why are urban administrators reluctant to share some of their power (authority) with neighborhood associations in the educational decision-making process?
- (2) How can urban administrators continue to espouse the value of participatory management in theory and avoid community involvement in practice?

Reluctance of Administrators: Visibility vs. Vulnerability

Many administrators are concerned about the relationship that exists between visibility and vulnerability, two factors that are very much in evidence in a collaborative decision-making process. There is no argument against the fact that involvement does suggest direct participation on the part of administrators, which in turn suggests that administrators must be visible throughout the decision-making process. Accordingly, no argument is made against the dictum--if you're visible, you're vulnerable.

It is understandable that vulnerability has a tendency to make administrators apprehensive, especially during times of social ferment. Visibility and the greater propensity for criticism adds to the discomfort. Unfortunately, this inability on the part of some administrators to better acclimate themselves to the glare of publicity that surrounds their activities and decisions presents a major stumbling block in developing a viable decision-making mechanism.

Despite the concern of many urban administrators that involvement with neighborhood associations is an open invitation to confrontations, neighborhood associations, in fact, rarely challenge administrators on educational problems and issues which are considered within the purview of administrators.

Neighborhood associations in our studies emphasized their respect for principals and their confidence in the ability of professional staffs to make educational decisions affecting the on-going educational program. Neighborhood associations want the opportunity to be involved in the educational decision-making process. They do not seek to dominate it. In fact, there is a strong dichotomy between issues which are perceived as "reasonable" issues for neighborhood concern and involvement and issues which neighborhood associations do not feel are "our business."

Strategies of Administrators: Leader-Dominant vs. Participatory Management

When administrators implement the concept of participatory management, they replace authoritarian bureaucracy with a model that emphasizes joint or team effort. It is true that participatory management will demand on the part of administrators more energy, still this model remains the most effective means of sharing the decision-making process. Equally important for administrators is the fact that participatory management leads not only to a sharing of responsibility but a sharing of accountability for achievements.

Nevertheless, many administrators are reluctant to involve neighborhood associations beyond token participation. Permitting associations authority to exert influence in the educational decision-making process is viewed by them as an abdication of the administrator's role as the educational leader of the community.

Some administrators perceive neighborhood associations as support mechanisms with limited influence to be called upon during crises or whenever joint presentations have to be made to the school board rather than as community power bases with high influence. These administrators usually encourage neighborhood associations to exert influence on educational problems and issues which administrators perceive to be of high priority.

In addition, some administrators are not averse to allowing neighborhood associations to exert influence on educational concerns that are not highly controversial. Nor are some administrators reluctant to involve associations to assist them in obtaining personnel, facilities, and funding. Involving neighborhood associations in these areas is a strategy used by administrators to legitimize their demands. In all these instances, however, the administrator assumes the leader-dominant management role.

Other administrators perceive neighborhood associations as powerless community mechanisms. They hold that associations are ineffective because they: (1) lack the ability to maintain coalitions, (2) are involved in numerous inter and intra organizational struggles, and (3) have a high turnover of leaders and members who leave to form splinter group associations. These administrators perceive neighborhood associations as "ad hoc" mechanisms maintained by a small group of activists with vested interests who are mobilized and activated during periods of crises. Generally, these administrators choose to ignore community groups when they are dormant, hoping to neutralize them in times of crises.

The issue of community control is often identified as a deterrent in developing more positive administrator-community relationships. Contrary to this feeling, our studies indicate that neighborhood associations are not bent toward obtaining community control. Avoiding participation on the part of administrators because of the real or imagined fear of community control will not appease the need of neighborhood associations to participate in decision-making.

Perhaps as suggested by Shapiro what should be questioned is whether administrators really want to become involved with neighborhood associations. Despite the current emphasis on participatory management, Shapiro contends that administrators are reluctant to involve themselves with community groups because administrators: (1) lack the necessary skills needed in working with community groups, (2) are afraid that involvement may lead to community control, (3) are hidebound and smug, (4) are aloof or arrogant, and (5) are unaware of the potential of neighborhood associations to assist them in educational decision-making.⁸

Options Open to School Administrators

The longer neighborhood associations are kept waiting in the wings, the more frustrated they become and the better the chances are that they will emerge more militant and in the form of pressure groups. In essence, urban administrators have two options: (1) unite neighborhood associations on a participatory management basis or (2) react defensively when neighborhood associations enter the educational arena on a "crisis" basis.

Urban administrators must realize that unless they unite with neighborhood associations, administrators will lose the opportunity to form interlocking, mutually supporting subsystems. The authors are of the opinion that unless an educational power complex is developed collaboratively, confrontations and chaos become the rules rather than exceptions to the rules.

Encouragement by administrators in involving neighborhood associations in decision-making would result in both the affective and instrumental behavior of participants. The invidious sense of powerlessness felt by neighborhood associations serving low socio-economic communities in dealing with administrators as representatives of middle-class institutions would be lessened if associations actively participated in decisions affecting a significant part of their lives.

Urban administrators must become catalytic agents in developing viable relationships with neighborhood associations. Whether administrators are to survive is often dependent upon how seriously they see the importance of this task. In essence, administrators must continue to be risk takers. Only if administrators really believe and work at improving relationships with neighborhood associations will they become more effective.

Finally, urban school administrators must come to realize that neighborhood associations are no longer willing to stand docilely on the sidelines and passively observe administrators unilaterally make decisions which affect the quality of life in their communities.

FOOTNOTES

¹Robert F. Lyke, "Citizen Participation in Urban School Politics" (paper prepared for the April 1970 meetings of the American Society for Public Administration, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), p. 11. (Mimeographed)

²Robert A. Dentler, American Community Problems (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), pp. 84-87.

³Paul Lauter, "The Short, Happy Life of the Adams-Morgan Community School Project," Harvard Educational Review, Spring, 1968.

⁴Henry S. Resnik, Turning on the System (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), pp. 288-89.

⁵John S. Diekhoff, "My Fair Ludlow," The Educational Forum, March, 1969, p. 283.

⁶Mitchell Sviridoff, "CPI: Window Dressing or a Program with Meaning?" (speech given at the Winchester Community School, New Haven, Connecticut, November 12, 1963), ERIC, ED o33 976, p. 4.

⁷Richard D. Hanusey, "A Study of the Influences of Neighborhood Associations on Public Schools of an Urban District as Perceived by Administrators" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Temple University, 1973) and Irene S. Jameson, "A Study of the Intended Influences of Neighborhood Associations on the Public Schools of an Urban School District" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Temple University, 1973).

⁸Elliot Shapiro et al., "Involving Community and Parents" (Bureau of Inservice Education, State Education Department, Albany, New York, April 1, 1967), p. 47.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Richard D. Hanusey is Superintendent of District Five, School District of Philadelphia. Irene S. Jameson is the human relations and community specialist for District Seven, School District of Philadelphia. Both received their doctorate degrees in education from Temple University in May, 1973. Drs. Hanusey and Jameson have had extensive experience in school-community relations.